

The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: From National Reconciliation to Global Ramifications

The **United States** withdrawal from **Afghanistan**, as announced by US President Joe Biden on *April 14*, is not only a historical event, but rather **part of a longer peace process**. Negotiated by the previous administration to occur on *May 1* and later rescheduled for *September 11* (*a day of sorrowful memory for all mankind*), the US withdrawal represents, in the view of President Biden, the result of an **accomplished objective**, i.e. *“to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again.”* Former US President Barack Obama concurred that *“we have accomplished all that we can militarily”*. Clearly, President Biden’s remarks that *“keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense”* beg the question of a possible re-prioritization process of United State’s Foreign and Defense policy.

The US President’s withdrawal announcement has been **echoed by a similar decision at NATO level**. Following a virtual meeting of allied Foreign and Defence Ministers, in the presence of US Secretaries of State and Defence, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated: *“we went into Afghanistan together, we have adjusted our posture together, and we are united in leaving together”*. Naturally, General Secretary Stoltenberg gave assurances that *“Allies and partners will continue to stand with the Afghan people, but it is now for the Afghan people to build a sustainable peace.”*

Of course, *“a sustainable peace”* represents a highly desirable goal for the entire region, **a goal that is yet to be reached in the contemporary history of Afghanistan**. The US military withdrawal represents an important dimension in this equation. However, in this stage, the determinant factor is the successful conclusion of the peace talks, which is still not yet sure. Naturally, one should, for sure, consider the continuous internal developments in Afghanistan, which are even more important and, as well, still difficult to predict with full certainty.

The *“Istanbul Conference on the Afghanistan Peace Process”* – a **UN, Qatar and Turkey**-brokered event, with full thoughts **to be the very final moment to reach an agreement that could open the door to national reconciliation**, has been for the second time postponed after the end of Ramadan. This kind of hesitation coming outspokenly from the Taliban circles has a destructive impact on the matter, being as well in contradiction with the positive expectations expressed, in specific lines and accents, by the relevant regional stakeholders, **on the evident ground that a peaceful Afghanistan is not only in the interest of the Afghan people, but, likewise, stretches to the interest and responsibilities of its neighbours and beyond.**

Historically, **Pakistan** has been one of the most affected countries by the Afghan conflict spill-over. Starting with

the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan has hosted an estimated number of over 4 million refugees. Definitely, beyond the obvious threat to Pakistan's security, the Afghan conflict had multiple nefarious effects in Pakistan: from drug trafficking to sectarianism and law and order problems. It is in this key that Pakistan's position with regard to the withdrawal of the US troops acknowledges *"there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and a negotiated political solution through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process is important for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan."* Similarly, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs manifested its hopes that *"the forthcoming meeting of Afghan leadership in Turkey would be an important opportunity for Afghans to make progress towards a negotiated political settlement"*, also indicating that *"it is important that the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan coincides with the progress in the peace process"*.

In the light of its economic power and economic development experience, **China's** capabilities as a stakeholder in the Afghan peace-process are not to be neglected, as well as its impact on the peace process. To the moment, China only agreed, as presented by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that *"the political solution to Afghanistan and early realisation of peace and stability in the country and fight against terrorism are in the common interest of all parties concerned including China and the U.S. and are also common aspiration of the international community"*. With regard to a more active future involvement in the peace talks, Beijing **only reflected upon the existing situation**: *"The current security situation in Afghanistan is still complex and grim and the problem of terrorism is far from being solved."* As the second biggest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget, with a peacekeeping personnel more than double the combined total from the other permanent members of the Security Council, **China's apparent reluctance to play a more active role in the neighbouring Afghanistan comes as a surprise.**

For **Iran**, the US withdrawal is welcomed. According to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, the withdrawal is a *"positive move and it has to be taken in light of the realities of our region."* In a similarly constructive key, the Iranian Minister added that *"Taliban should be part of the process in Afghanistan and Taliban should not control that peace"*, pleading for a *"broad-based government in Afghanistan based on the Constitution and framework that already Afghanistan agreed on"*.

India, according to the statements of the Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, supports that *"The peace process must be based on foundational principles to which we all subscribe."* Furthermore, the Indian Foreign Minister expressed his belief that *"durable peace there would require harmonising interests of all, both within and around that country"*. India's stance was reiterated by the Spokesperson of the External Affairs Ministry, in the aftermath of the US withdrawal announcement: *"Any political settlement must be inclusive and should preserve the socio-economic and political gains of the past 19 years."* In this regard, the peace process *"should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled"*. Clearly, as a consistent provider of economic and development assistance to Afghanistan, India is committed to support the reconstruction and development process of the country, an effort rendered possible only by the strengthening national, regional and international consensus on the Afghan peace talks.

For **Russia**, the five month delay of the US withdrawal departs from the agreement reached in Doha on *February 29* last year between Washington and the Taliban forces. The Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its “concern” that: “*the armed conflict in Afghanistan might escalate in the near future, which in turn might undermine efforts to start direct intra-Afghan negotiations.*” The March 18 Moscow-hosted “*Extended Troika*” on the Afghan peace process, comprising of Russia, China, the United States and Pakistan, along with representatives of the main intra-national militant parties, **produced a Joint Statement** committed to “*reduce the level of violence in the country and on the Taliban not to pursue a Spring offensive.*” Consequently, one may conclude that **Moscow intends to play a more assertive role in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US withdrawal.**

Clearly, the **US will continue to play a significant role in Afghanistan** in the aftermath of their military withdrawal. Despite the terrorism threat having been diminished, certain militant groups (*Islamic State in Khorasan, Islamic Emirate*) could augment their capabilities and re-emerge as significant threats not only in terms of democratic state-building, human rights and humanitarian concerns, but similarly as security threats for US and its allies. In this regard, the **military withdrawal should not be interpreted as a complete disengagement.** Development aid, sanctions, visas, remote support for the Afghan defence forces, as well as a robust and continuous involvement in the peace process remain tools of engagement in Afghanistan that US is likely to be used in the future.

Naturally, **every stakeholder has its specific doubts and interests**, depending on its geopolitical stance and foreign affairs priorities. The degree of extent to which such interests overlap represents, in fact, a major factor in the Afghan peace process, on which regional stability depends.

It goes without saying that the Afghan sides involved in the process of creating a peaceful and stable Afghanistan are very much aware of the above positions of the “*external factor*”, but the “*internal solution*”, being the ultimate element for a final and durable success in this country, is still unpredictable as far as the time and substance are concerned.

This could be the reason that, while **a common regional and international will to facilitate the peace-talks is obvious**, the results of such efforts might be neither immediate nor obvious.

As the military presence of the Soviet Union and the United States in Afghanistan proves, **military solution is the least viable path to peace and reconciliation.** A multiple and diverse assistance in an Afghan-led peace process seems to have become the common denominator of all major stakeholders. Its implementation and appeal to keep all parties – domestic, regional and international – involved might be the next milestone in Afghanistan’s contemporary history.

After all, a successful peace-process in Afghanistan translates into multiple security, political and economic benefits for all parties involved and a safer world overall. The efforts aiming this target should be further multiplied.

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The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position or view of IRSEA.